

# AMERICAN LENINISM IN THE 1970s



Jim O'Brien



# The Maoist Internationalist Movement

January 1991

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—Mao Zedong, *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 208.

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# AMERICAN LENINISM IN THE 1970s

Jim O'Brien

The course of American Leninism in recent years has been shaped by three main forces: the legacy of the Communist Party USA, the student revolt of the 1960s, and (more in practice than in ideology) the American working class. It is the last of these influences that is hardest to trace. The vocabulary of Leninism is full of phrases such as "the masses," "advanced forces," "vanguard," "united front," and other terms which often make it hard for the listener or reader to understand exactly what is going on. This article tries to sort out a mass of information on American Leninism in the 1970s and tell what is going on. Leninist groups are a large part of the present-day American left, and what they do is important.

The central core of Leninism is the disciplined political party, in which internal debate may be allowed but those members unite in carrying out the party's agreed-upon program. Such a party, it is asserted, can be the instrument by which the working class can destroy a capitalist state and assume direction of society for itself. Historically, according to all Leninist groups, this is what happened in Russia in 1917: the working class took power. Beyond that, there is intense debate among Leninist groups as to the course of events in the USSR and other countries that are presently run by Communist parties. But whatever their positions in these debates, all Leninist organizations share the same basic perspective for a socialist revolution in the U.S.: that it can, and in fact must, be carried out under the leadership of a Leninist party.

In the U.S., the biggest and most important Leninist group, from the time of its



founding in 1921, has been the Communist Party USA. The high point of its influence was in the 1930s, when its combined adult and youth membership reached a peak of 100,000 in 1938. But in good times and bad, the CP has been the one Leninist organization with the most members, the strongest working-class roots, and the widest influence. It is to the CP's history that rival Leninist organizations turn, time and again, to explain the leadership vacuum that they believe plagues the American working class.

The goal of all the CP's rivals is to build a party that will be larger and stronger than the CP and that will offer a clear left-wing alternative to the CP's strategic compromises and its fealty to the Soviet Union. Without this vision of a powerful left-Leninist party, none of the CP's rivals would hold together. Yet it is precisely this goal which is called severely into question by the experience of the 1970s. For all the valuable work their members have been able to do in concrete situations, none of the groups appears likely to supplant the CP with a mass-based party to its left. A history of Leninism in the 1970s has to take account both of the concrete work and of the party-building aspirations.

This article is not written from a Leninist point of view, but neither is it written with the purpose of joining in a wholly negative dismissal of "the sects." A sizeable number of the most serious, hardest-working, most self-critical, and most deeply radical people in the present-day left are members of Leninist organizations or would like to be. In particular, a very high proportion of those leftists doing political work in a working class context are Leninists. The article's non-Leninism is reflected, not so much in hostility to the groups or people it discusses, as in a different set of assumptions about the meaning of their

activity. I do not see the various parties and pre-party formations as entrants in a competition to see which one will emerge victorious and "lead" the American working class. Rather, I see them as groups of people who in various ways are trying to participate in, and influence, popular resistance to the workings of capitalist society. Leninist organizational forms may at times help or hinder them in this effort, but the forms themselves are hardly a timeless formula standing above history.

The article follows a basically chronological order. It first sketches the background of the Communist Party, next traces the emergence of the CP's left-Leninist rivals in the 1960s and early '70s, and then discusses their experience in working class activity in the early '70s. After tracing the groups' fortunes through the economic crisis of the mid-1970s, it tries to weigh the meaning of the historical record up to now. If the article seems at times to give too much space to the organizational history of various groups, that is because the publications of all the groups routinely ignore or distort the experiences of their rivals. In its sorting-out of the organizational chronologies, the article should provide a service even for many readers who disagree with its conclusions.

## THE COMMUNIST PARTY

When the early stirrings of the 1960s student revolt first appeared, the CP was at the lowest point of its forty-year history. Just as the party had basked and flourished in the New Deal years, and in the wartime crusade against Nazism, so its fortunes suffered severely in the postwar shift to the right in American politics. The effects of this shift were of course savagely compounded by Cold War repression. By the end of the 1950s, after a bruising internal fight

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Perhaps most of those who are not in tiny, isolated local groups are "underground" in this sense.

(1) over loyalty to the Soviet Union and the trap-  
pings of Leninist orthodoxy, party membership  
stood at one-tenth or less of its peak in the late  
1930s.

(2) It was not the CP's strategy that had changed  
over the decades, but its ability to carry out its  
strategy. In the late '30s CP members had held  
leading positions in a number of new industrial  
unions, and had led broad popular-front organ-  
izations (the National Negro Congress, Ameri-  
can Youth Congress, American Student Union,  
International Workers Order, for example)  
involving millions of people. Party members  
saw these organizations as part of a strong  
popular front against fascism and domestic  
reaction, championing the interests of the vast  
majority of the population. During the war  
years, in which the CP opposed strikes and dis-  
couraged anti-racism demonstrations in the  
interests of national unity, its influence via the  
unions and the popular-front organizations was  
no less strong than in the '30s. But after the  
war, as repression began, every organization in  
which the Communists played a prominent role  
was systematically isolated and in most cases  
destroyed. The third-party presidential cam-  
paign of former Vice-President Henry Wallace  
in 1948, in which party members were the main  
foot-soldiers, symbolized the difficulties in  
trying to reconstitute a popular front that was  
no longer popular.

In the aftermath of the Wallace campaign,  
and of the prosecution of party leaders under  
the anti-subversive Smith Act (whose use  
against Trotskyists during the war had been  
warmly applauded by the CP) the CP resolved  
to dig more deeply underground. Several thou-  
sand of its cadre went underground in the tradi-  
tional sense, changing their identities and  
homes for several years. The others went under-  
ground in the sense of doing their main political

work in organizations which were not CP-  
dominated and which either tried to exclude  
communists or at least did not welcome them.  
The party's 1954 program, for example, urged  
"support for the anti-depression demands of  
the A.F. of L. and C.I.O., for the farm de-  
mands of the National Farmers Union, for the  
democratic demands of the National Associa-  
tion for the Advancement of Colored People,  
for every proposal, every action, which can  
help save our people from threatening eco-  
nomic ruin, fascism, and war." Members were  
encouraged to work within the Democratic  
party where possible, as they had done during  
the Roosevelt years.

The internal brawl which cost the CP a  
majority of its remaining members in 1956-58  
was over issues other than the central thrust of  
party strategy. A large reform wing, most of  
whose supporters dropped out during the fight,  
tried to get the party to assert its independence  
from the USSR in regard to issues like the  
Hungarian uprising of 1956. There was no dis-  
agreement over the proper course of political  
activity for the CP, which was to work for an  
"anti-monopoly people's coalition" — a  
rechristening of the popular front. The CP's  
draft political resolution in 1959 said "It is  
essential to bring into existence an anti-  
monopoly people's coalition uniting labor, the  
Negro people, the small farmers, students,  
professionals, small businessmen and other  
democratic elements on a program of action for  
economic welfare, democratic rights and  
peace." As Gus Hall, elected party secretary in  
1959 in a victory for the most orthodox faction  
within the party, put it, "We want to partici-  
pate in, organize and lead the broadest of  
united front movements on every level — in a  
thousand ways, in 10,000 places, on 100,000  
issues if possible, with 180,000,000 people."



# A GUIDE TO GROUPS

## I. MAJOR PARTIES AND PRE-PARTY FORMATIONS

1. **Communist Party (CP)**: Founded in 1921 as a merger of two parties which had split away from the Socialist Party in 1919 in response to the formation of the Third International; since its founding, the largest Leninist organization in the U.S.; newspapers are the *Daily World* and the West Coast *People's World*.

2. **Socialist Workers Party (SWP)**: Founded in 1938 by members of a Trotskyist tendency whose founders were expelled from the CP in 1928; publishes a weekly newspaper, *The Militant*.

3. **International Socialists (IS)**: Founded as a national organization in 1969 as a merger of Independent Socialist Clubs, patterned after one started in Berkeley in 1964; ideologically a successor to the "Shachtmanites", who split away from the SWP in 1940 arguing that the Soviet Union was a new form of class society (bureaucratic collectivism) in which workers are exploited as much as under capitalism; publishes the weekly *Workers Power*.

4. **Workers World Party**: Founded in 1958 as a split-off from the SWP, based mainly in Buffalo, with an analysis much more friendly to the USSR and other Communist countries than other Trotskyists have; publishes the weekly *Workers World*.

5. **Progressive Labor Party (PL)**: Founded in 1961 as the Progressive Labor Movement, chiefly by members of a small left-opposition within the CP in New York State; became the Progressive Labor party in 1965; the leading Maoist group in the U.S. from 1961 until 1971 when it denounced Chinese leadership; publishes the weekly *Challenge/Desafio*.

6. **Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP)**: Formed as the Bay Area Revolutionary Union in 1967, becoming a national organization (the Revolutionary Union) in 1970-71 and forming the RCP in 1975; Maoist; publishes the monthly *Revolution*.

7. **Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)**, formerly the October League: Founded in 1972 as a merger of two

local Maoist groups, the October League (Los Angeles) and the Georgia Communist League (Atlanta), both founded in 1970-71; publishes the weekly *Call/Clarín*; became the CP(ML) in 1977.

8. **Communist Labor Party (CLP)**: Founded as a party in 1974, derived from the California Communist League which was founded in 1968 and became the Communist League in 1970; nominally Maoist at first, but swung rapidly in 1975 toward a basically pro-Soviet position, with the one consistency being allegiance to the Soviet Union during the Stalin period; publishes the weekly *People's Tribune*.

## II. YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

1. **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)**: Founded in 1945 as the social-democratic Student League for Industrial Democracy; changed name to SDS in 1960 and became the main organizational vehicle for the New Left in the '60s; after splits in 1969 a much smaller organization keeping the name SDS was maintained under PL leadership until 1973-74.

2. **Young Socialist Alliance (YSA)**: Founded in 1960 as the youth group of the SWP.

3. **Youth Against War and Fascism (YAWF)**: Founded in 1962 and affiliated with the Workers World Party, with the organizational lines between them not always being clear.

4. **Young Workers Liberation League (YWLL)**: Founded in 1970 as the *de facto* youth group of the CP.

5. **Revolutionary Student Brigade (RSB)**: Founded as the Attica Brigade in 1973, with strong influence from the RU; changed name in 1974 and formally became the RCP's student group after the RCP was formed in the fall of 1975.

6. **Communist Youth Organization (CYO)**: Founded in 1975 as the youth group of the October League.

7. **Red Tide**: Founded in 1974 as the IS youth group.

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Shrunkened though it was, the CP was still the most important left organization in the U.S. at the time the student movement started, and it grew throughout the decade of the '60s. But the youth radicalization of the '60s did not come via the CP and it was not even significantly influenced by the CP. The party's only real youth group in the '60s, the W.E.B. DuBois clubs (founded in 1964) had only a small and transient presence on the campuses, and CP influence in other organizations was slight. There were several reasons for this lack of a CP presence. In the early '60s these included the residue of Cold War repression (Communist speakers would not have been allowed on most campuses, for example); students' own doses of anti-Communism; the ten-year generation gap that resulted from the CP's having attracted very few new members in the 1950s; and the CP's stilted propaganda. (As one college paper commented on a speech by a CP spokesman in 1960, "There is no doubt that many of the changes he predicts will come about — indeed, many of them are happening right now. But God, he was dull!")<sup>\*</sup> Direct CP influence was probably strongest in the mid-60s, as the student movement began to move to the left and as Cold War anti-communism began to be discredited. But as radicalization proceeded further still in the late '60s, the CP was left behind. It was too well-established to be transformed by students coming into it (as the Socialist Workers Party was). For newly radicalized youth who were coming to see themselves as revolutionaries, the Soviet Union was a woefully inadequate model of revolution, and the anti-monopoly coalition seemed irrelevant to revolution altogether.

### THE REVIVAL OF LEFT-LENINISM IN THE 1960s

The Communist Party grew in the turmoil of

the 1960s but it was not transformed. The CP had too long a history, too many roots sunk in practical activity, too much caution bred of the repression it had undergone, to be fundamentally shaken up by the explosion of popular movements in the 1960s. In all important respects the CP is the same party today as it was in 1960, only larger. But there were thousands of participants in the 1960s movements, especially their student component, who came to embrace the basic tenets of Leninism without accepting the CP as the embodiment of the Leninist tradition. For them, the compromises and low-keyed political approach of the CP were not a necessary tactic for organizational survival, but were a systematic betrayal of revolutionary principles. The heady events of the '60s had given these people (along with tens of thousands of others who never accepted Leninism) a sense that revolutionary change was possible. The CP was seen as a wholly inadequate vehicle for working for anything other than marginal reforms in the system. These people swelled the ranks of the left-Leninist groupings that were already in existence, and they changed the basic composition of those groupings.\* Radicalized young people also created wholly new left-Leninist organizations which took gradual shape in the 1970s. Except for the CP, all the present-day organizations which claim to be (or hope to become) the vanguard of the American working class are essentially products of the 1960s. (even swp?)

The best starting point for a look at left-Leninism in the '60s is with the experience of the older groups which were transformed by the

\* In using the term "left-Leninism" I am accepting the intention of all the CP's rivals to set up a party that is more revolutionary than the CP. Whether any particular group is actually "to the left" of the CP on this or that issue, or in general, is potentially a subject for endless discussion, but not by me.



influx of young members in the '60s. Of these the oldest and most important was the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP had originated as one of the small Trotskyist factions that were expelled from Communist parties around the world when Stalin cemented his control of the USSR and the Communist International in the late 1920s. Trotskyism held that the USSR had been a revolutionary socialist society in its early years, and was still a workers state, but that its revolutionary nature had been eroded by dictatorial rule and by an abandonment of world revolution in favor of "socialism in one country." The American SWP had reached a peak membership of about 3,000 at the end of World War II, having grown as a vigorous opponent of the labor unions' no-strike pledge (which the CP had just as avidly supported and helped to enforce) during the war. In the years of Cold War reaction the party lost about four-fifths of its members, including most of its trade union cadre, by attrition and splits. By the end of the '50s the SWP was chiefly a propaganda group which ran candidates for office (about  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{3}$  of what it is now (1980)).

From the late '50s on, with no durable roots in the working class, the SWP looked to student work as its primary source of recruitment. It worked assiduously to form a youth group which constituted itself as the Young Socialist Alliance in the spring of 1960, just as the first shoots of the 1960s student movement were beginning to appear. Its unambiguous orientation to the importance of campus work enabled it to ride the student movement to growth and influence over the course of the '60s. The anti-war movement which grew from 1965 on was most important in this connection. The SWP-YSA threw itself wholeheartedly into the movement from the start; its members became (and recruited) the foot-soldiers of single-issue end-the-war committees all across the country. In

time its ability to keep these committees active and to build demonstrations had made it the most influential single group in the coalitions that called the giant peace rallies of the late '60s and early '70s.

Chiefly on the strength of its anti-war work and its recruitment through the YSA, the SWP had a party membership of around 1,200 by 1973. By that time also, effective leadership in the party was very largely in the hands of younger cadre who had come in through the student movement and had little continuity with the party's working class roots of the 1930s and '40s. Older leaders such as the working-class veterans James P. Cannon and Farrel Dobbs were replaced by younger activists such as Jack Barnes, Peter Camejo, and Barry Shepard, all of whom had come through the YSA in the '60s. It was not a coup — the older leaders were the ones who had decided to turn toward the campus for recruits — but it did represent a decisive change in composition and in tone.

Although in a very different way from the SWP, the Workers World Party was also given a decisive stimulation for growth in the 1960s. Workers World originated as a minor split-off from the SWP in 1958, led mainly by veteran steelworkers in Buffalo with a few people in Youngstown and New York City. Its leader was (and still is) Sam Marcy. But its decisive growth came in the 1960s as the most angrily anti-imperialist wing of the youthful anti-war movement. Except for its newspaper, *Workers World*, the party existed mainly through its youth affiliate, Youth Against War and Fascism, which began in Buffalo and New York and which held the first Vietnam war demonstration in the U.S. in 1962. With the growth of the mass anti-war movement later in the decade, YAWF, expanding slowly to other eastern cities, kept at the movement's most

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militant edge by carrying NLF flags and being the least ready to back off from confrontations with the police. YAWF was the one group besides the Weathermen to take part in the Chicago "Days of Rage" street marches in the fall of 1969. By the end of the '60s YAWF had perhaps a couple of hundred members and, because their memberships were largely overlapping, so did Workers World.

The Progressive Labor Party was at first a parallel development to Workers World, breaking away from the CP in the same way that Workers World split from the Socialist Workers Party. PL started as the Progressive Labor Movement in 1962, with a handful of New York State CP members expelled from the party for ultra-leftism (the main difference apparently was over their desire for a more open communist presence in working class activity) plus a smaller group of revolutionary students. Over the next three years PL maintained a flamboyantly open communist identification, recruiting from among the most radical, alienated, and militant members of a youth movement that was only slowly beginning to move to the left. Through its "illegal" trips to Cuba in 1963 and 1964 and the May 2nd Movement which it initiated as the first student group to proclaim resistance to the draft, PL built up a cadre large enough to take the step of forming the Progressive Labor Party in the spring of 1965. This cadre was overwhelmingly non-working class, and PL later said that of the 200 people present at the party's founding convention there was only one trade union club (consisting of five members) represented.

From the time of its proclamation of the party, PL made a turn toward base-building on campus and in the working class. It repudiated the culturally freewheeling tone of its early years, discouraging long hair and condemning drugs. In trade union work, the PL leadership

later recalled, during this period "most members were not known as PL'ers by their co-workers." In student work PL dissolved the May 2nd Movement and joined SDS in the winter of 1965-66, playing at first an inconspicuous role, then in 1967 putting forward the concept of a "worker-student alliance" and encouraging students to take summer jobs in blue-collar workplaces. Its own student cadres were prodded to take blue-collar jobs after leaving school.

Within SDS, despite the generally unobtrusive nature of PL's work at first, the party came under increasing attack from New Leftists. The attacks sprang in part from visceral worry about any disciplined cadre organization working within the unstructured milieu of SDS, and in part from PL's culturally retrograde opposition to the New Left's attempts to fuse youth culture (which PL considered a symptom of late-capitalist degeneracy) and radical politics. But PL grew apace as a function of SDS's growth. As the one Leninist group working within SDS it was in a position to say, in effect, "Here's how you can really change society" to students who were just being won to an amorphous radicalism. It had ready answers during a time when SDS national leaders were turning to one after another strategy in a series of efforts to comprehend the mushrooming student revolt and to decide where they should try to nudge it. PL's status as an opposition inside national SDS gave it far greater credibility than it would have had as the leadership of the organization. This was shown after SDS split apart in the summer of 1969 and PL inherited one of the remnants, the only one to keep the name SDS for long. PL's student program for the 1969-70 academic year, a year which turned out to be marked by the largest student protests in the country's history, was the building of a "campus worker-student



alliance." It was a chimerical attempt to focus student militancy on campus-employee grievances rather than on issues like the war. In the tidal wave of campus militancy in 1969-70, PL's strategy — imposed on its student cadre by the party leadership — amounted to a few specks of foam.

A final group with Old Left roots which emerged as part of the student movement was the International Socialists. Its heritage was in a "third camp" variant of Trotskyism which saw the USSR and other Communist countries as a new form of class society, no more progressive than the western capitalist countries and with their working classes being equally exploited. Formed as a national organization in 1969, the IS grew out of a network of local campus-based Independent Socialist clubs, of which the largest and most active was at Berkeley. The clubs' major achievement had been to initiate Peace and Freedom parties in several states for the 1968 elections, with Eldridge Cleaver of the

Black Panther Party as the presidential candidate.

IS was not organized along democratic centralist lines, and was only ambiguously Leninist in its ideology at the time of its founding as a national group. With a much harsher evaluation of Communist-led nationalist movements than other Leninist groups, IS even tended to take a standoffish attitude toward the movement against the Vietnam war. Like its older and much stronger British counterpart (also called International Socialists), it made no claim at being a party and placed party-building in the distant future. When it dabbled briefly in SDS just before the 1969 split, it was as the most vigorous defender of a democratic and egalitarian vision of socialism.

In addition to the revival of various earlier forms of left-Leninism in the 1960s, the student movement also produced its own home-grown Leninism, which has come to be embodied chiefly in the Revolutionary Communist Party

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*International Socialists Convention, 1977. Workers' Power.*

and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) but which has many other manifestations as well. New Left Leninism arose within and around SDS in the late '60s, with a number of propelling causes (besides the natural appeal of Leninism to a radicalized intelligentsia, whose role in bringing revolutionary ideas to the working class it accentuates.) There was the presence of PL, which influenced even its opponents and provided a constant goad because of its persistence and discipline. The prestige among anti-imperialist students of the Vietnamese, Cuban, and (especially before the 1972 Nixon visit) Chinese Communists also was important. So was the example of the Black Panther Party, whose violent rhetoric commanded attention and whose vicious repression by the state had the effect of silencing doubt about its claims to be the leading force for revolution in the U.S. Finally, there was the frustration of the New Left leadership within SDS of being atop a vast organization which, because of its extreme de facto decentralization, they could not actually control.

New Left Leninism appeared in SDS in the spring of 1969 chiefly as rhetoric. In the superheated atmosphere of that spring there was a frantic scrambling around (in the Columbia University Library and elsewhere) for classical texts that would enable New Leftists to tackle PL on its own grounds. If PL quoted Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, its enemies in SDS would quote them, too, but with different fragments supporting different conclusions for present-day strategy. Very quickly Leninism became a "given" in the debates within national SDS; even the Weatherman faction, for all of its frenzied voluntarism and its dismissal of the traditional working class, made sure to make a claim on the Leninist heritage. But the Weathermen (who became the Weather Underground in early 1970) made no attempt to form

a Leninist party. Nor, for several years, did any of the other groupings in SDS who had adopted Leninist rhetoric during the internal debates. The Black Panther Party, whose representative at the 1969 SDS convention had urged students to "pick up the telephone and call Chairman Mao Tse-Tung" if they doubted that the Panthers were the vanguard organization in the U.S., was accorded the deference which its leaders' martyrdom had seemingly earned it. Only in late 1970 (when they bungled the planning of a large national conference they had called for Washington D.C.) and early 1971 (when the Panthers were split into bitterly quarreling groups led by Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver) did the Panthers' prestige ebb. Thereafter the road was left clear for groups emerging from the white New Left to begin making their own claims to form Leninist vanguard organizations.

#### THE RECEDING OF THE MASS MOVEMENT

The nationwide student strike against the Cambodia invasion in May 1970, in which hundreds of campuses were closed down either by students or by fearful administrators, marked the climax of the student movement. Over the next two and a half years students continued to make up the largest single group in the large anti-war demonstrations, but the campuses themselves were increasingly quiet. Although there were protests at more schools than in the late '60s, they were smaller and they represented chiefly the delayed ripple-effects of the student movement on such schools as regional state colleges and church colleges. In the spring of 1972 there were widespread student protests at the Nixon administration's stepped up bombing of North Vietnam and mining of Haiphong Harbor, but they were on nowhere near the scale of the Cambodia



reaction two years earlier. After the 1971-72 school year there was a pronounced decline in student politics across the board, and there was no mistaking that the student movement of the 1960s was over.

For years there had been discussion within the student left about what people should do after they left school, and how political activity could be carried on in a non-college environment. This question became all the more crucial after 1970 as more and more veterans of the student movement were out of college and as campuses became less and less of an obvious political arena.

In addition to the student movement's decline, there was another circumstance that affected the political choices of those who wanted to remain active. That was the appearance of working class militancy in 1969-70, on a larger scale than in a long time. More workers went on strike in 1970 than in any year since 1952, with the highlights being a long GE strike stretching over the winter of 1969-70, a Post Office wildcat broken only after U.S. troops sorted the mail in New York, Teamster wildcats forcing renegotiation of the master freight agreement, and a two-month strike against General Motors in the fall of '70. This was coupled with a mild recession in 1970 that made it look as though a long era of relatively prosperity might be coming to a close. Within the student left there had always been an instinctive (however unsystematic) siding with workers against management; for example, at the 1968 SDS convention when a reporter showed up from a Detroit newspaper that was on strike the entire convention was almost instantly on its feet shouting "out! out!" That was at a convention where a resolution that effectively wrote off the traditional working class almost got a majority of votes. Thus when strikes and the economic downturn in 1970 made the work-

ing class more "visible" to student radicals outside it, it was natural that a growing number of activists would try to put their work in the context of class struggle.

Beyond that, there was the question of organizational forms. There were three reasons why Leninism emerged as the main type of organization chosen by those veterans of the student movement who wanted to engage in working class activism. First, Leninism was by far the best-known ideology that stressed the importance of workers and the working class. Leninist revolutions, even the Chinese revolution which was based on peasants in a country with only a tiny working class, had always been carried on in the name of the proletariat. The vocabulary of Leninism still offered a ready framework in which working class activity could be viewed. Second, the existence of more than a dozen countries governed by Leninist parties offered a prospect of apparent success that was lacking in alternative socialist visions.

Third, this was a period of declining political motion; the initiative in such a period always lies with those who call for tighter forms of organization in which individuals are bound by group discipline and pressure to maintain an intense pace of work.

In the gradual turn toward Leninism and toward working class involvement, the Communist Party was in some ways in an enviable position. It had not committed itself wholeheartedly to the student movement in the way that other groups had, and it had used the 1960s to strengthen ties within the unions and within nonwhite (mainly black) communities. Its primarily campus-centered W.E.B. DuBois Clubs had been totally overshadowed by SDS in the late '60s, but the CP's youth work had been strong enough that in February 1970 it was able to form the Young Workers Liberation League with a racially mixed and mainly non-student

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composition. Of the 400 registered for the YWLL's founding convention over half were blue-collar workers, over 40 percent were non-white, and only about a quarter were college or high school students.<sup>5</sup> The CP also called (though not under its own name) a Rank and File labor conference in Chicago in June 1970 that drew 875 union members, over a third of them black.<sup>6</sup> Trade Unionists for Action and Democracy (TUAD), the organization which came out of the Chicago conference, has never become more than an organizational shell, but the conference itself showed the extent to which the CP had preserved its base within the unions.

Just as the CP had changed very little in the midst of the social turmoil of the 1960s, it changed very little in the early '70s. To a limited extent, it felt more able to conduct political activity in its own name — the Angela Davis case, which dragged on from the magnetic CP member's arrest in October 1970 to her acquittal in June 1972, was an enormous help in that regard — but for the most part CP members' day to day work was carried on quietly in the multitude of scattered organizations that were considered as parts of the anti-monopoly coalition.

The Socialist Workers Party, which had thrived in the largely campus-based anti-war movement, carried its same program into the early '70s. It continued to furnish the organizational backbone of such mass demonstrations as those in Washington and San Francisco in April 1971 (the largest since November 1969) and it tried hard to step into the organizational vacuum left by the splintering of SDS in mid-1969 by building YSA chapters on more campuses. It tried to carry its formula of precisely-focused mass demonstrations into the area of women's liberation with the formation of the Women's National Abortion Action Coalition in 1971, although WONAAC was

never able to build demonstrations larger than about three thousand people. By 1973 the anti-war movement had collapsed with the signing of the Vietnam peace treaty, WONAAC had collapsed with the 1973 Supreme Court decision overturning state abortion laws, and YSA's main campus focus was to sell newspapers and run candidates in student government elections. But the SWP had continued to replenish its cadre via its recruitment through YSA and the coalition groups it controlled in the early '70s. By 1973, the SWP had 1,200 members; and over half of the people who attended its national convention were under 25 years old.<sup>7</sup> Its polished weekly paper *The Militant* had an average paid circulation of 31,000, up from 17,000 in 1970. It was able to support a large paid staff (a minority at the 1973 convention tried to get the paid staff limited to 10 percent of the membership but failed)<sup>8</sup> and was in a position to take an active role when new struggles would emerge in the future.

The SWP had no policy of workplace concentration, but its members for the most part went into white collar jobs (as high school or elementary teachers, journalists, social service workers, technicians, computer programmers, library workers, etc.) at the semi-professional upper reaches of the working class. Ironically, the Progressive Labor Party (which had put forward the strongest emphasis on industrial workers within the student movement) shifted at the start of the '70s away from putting its ex-student members into blue-collar workplaces, letting them drift instead into the professions and into the same sort of white collar jobs that SWP members generally entered. In both cases, the political activity that party members would engage in would mainly be away from the members' own workplaces. But the similarity ended there. PL's program was to build "Challenge collectives" through which party members and



supporters would sell PL's monthly paper at factory gates and other working class locations. There was a certain logic in pushing *Challenge*, whose photographs, frenetically down-to-earth language, and Workers-Will-Get-Revenge headlines made it seem like a left-wing *National Enquirer*. Sales went up to a peak of 90,000 in mid-1970. \* PL's demonstrations, too, had in 1970-71 an unabashed revolutionism that made them ideal expressions of anger for the people (many of them working class) who took part. Whatever the ostensible purpose of the demonstration, it was sure to have an impassioned incoherence, with all kinds of issues brought in and with PL's "Fight for Socialism" party flags flying proudly.

Up until 1971, whatever the vagaries of its strategy for the U.S., PL had kept its role as the main pro-China group in the American left. But in 1971 PL followed the logic of its intensified anti-revisionism and charged that China was headed down the same "capitalist road" that the USSR had earlier followed. Since 1971 PL has had no socialist homeland (not even a "degenerated" or "deformed" workers state as Trotskyists do). Even though PL had long been under attack from other American leftists claiming loyalty to Maoism, its voluntary abandonment of its links with China meant that the field would be opened for a bewildering variety of new groups hoping to occupy PL's former position as the leading Maoist group.

At the same time PL's ex-student members were pulling out of blue-collar workplaces, a

\* *Challenge*, August 1970. I should add that former PL members I have talked with feel that the strenuous sales campaigns, rather than the paper's actual appeal to workers, accounted for the high circulation figures. They feel that the workers they sold *Challenge* to would have bought any paper that seemed to be generally "on their side" — out of solidarity rather than out of interest in the paper.

large proportion of the members of the International Socialists were going in. IS's ideology had always stressed the direct control of production by workers, and it moved to act on that belief soon after the founding of IS as a national organization in 1969. It moved its national headquarters from Berkeley to Detroit in 1970, renamed its paper *Workers Power*, and decided that IS as a group would pressure individual members to "industrialize." Members sought jobs in basic industries — chiefly in auto, trucking (and other jobs covered by the Teamsters Union) and telephones — and with a particular emphasis on industrial cities in the Midwest. Its campus-centered chapters were seen chiefly as sources of recruitment, with the potential for feeding members into the areas where IS hoped to concentrate. IS's goal was to transform an almost entirely campus-derived organization into an instrument of working class power, and the first step was for the members to become workers themselves.

The Workers World Party underwent a much slower change in the early '70s, though its emphasis did gradually shift. Most of its work was still through YAWF and was still focused on the war, combined with work around the defense of imprisoned black militants such as the Black Panthers in New York and New Haven. It remained a small (though remarkably active for its size) East Coast cadre organization, composed mainly of whites from non-working class backgrounds. In 1971-72 it turned toward a more working class emphasis, setting up local groups under the name Center for United Labor Action as vehicles for doing some work around issues such as unemployment, the Nixon administration's wage freeze, and welfare. Its members were encouraged to get blue collar jobs ("If you are sure in your own mind that the future belongs to the working people," Workers World founder Sam

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Marcy told members, "even the crummiest plant is easier to take"), and get involved in union work. But in most areas there was no policy of workplace concentration; the group hoped for more working class (especially non-white) recruitment, but the focus of its work was outside the workplace and on the streets.

\* \* \* \* \*

The most striking development in American Leninism in the early '70s was not the fate of the CP or its already-existing rivals, but the rise of what became known to its partisans as the "new communist movement." This was a home-grown Leninism that sprang from the ruins of the white New Left and from the left edges of nationalist movements among nonwhite minorities in the U.S. Never well-defined, its negative points of reference were set forth by Irwin Silber of *The Guardian* newspaper in 1972. Silber reported that "a sizeable cadre of radical activists" had "learned from its encounters with anarchism, adventurism, Trotskyism and revisionism" and was trying to develop coherent political principles and organizational forms."

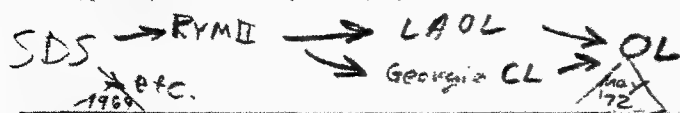
*The Guardian* itself is a weekly which started as a voice of the CP-influenced "progressive" survivors of the late 1940s and '50s. It grew as a publicizer of anti-war activities and was heavily influenced by the New Left in the late '60s. Now in the early '70s, after a split in its staff, it became a rallying point for the new Leninism. The paper's chief contribution was in its wholly favorable coverage of China and its retailing for U.S. leftists of the Chinese government's view of world affairs. Mao Tse-tung and the Cultural Revolution had been warmly viewed in the New Left in the late '60s, but in the early '70s a disillusionment had begun to set in, provoked by China's reception of President

Nixon and its support for the governments of Pakistan and Ceylon against insurrections. China seemed to most leftists to be operating more as a traditional Great Power and less as a beacon of revolution. *The Guardian's* intervention — it had by far the highest circulation of any independent left publication in the U.S. — was instrumental in helping to carve out a Maoist milieu within the American left. In this milieu a variety of parties and pre-party groups could find nourishment.

China was attractive to these people less for the details of its political and economic life than for the hope it offered for revolution in the U.S. In the Chinese government's world view, the Soviet Union had been a socialist country for decades, and then after Stalin's death in 1953 had veered toward capitalism and imperialism. No American Maoist group has been able to defend this historical position intelligibly, but for all of them it provided the assurance that they — rather than the much larger CP — were in the mainstream of twentieth century Communism. The task of Leninists in the U.S., in this view, was to recapture the revolutionary boldness that international Communism and even the American CP had shown in the era of Stalin. There was an assurance of historical continuity and (in China) a present-day example of a revolution that had not taken the wrong road. For those looking for an alternative to "anarchism, adventurism, Trotskyism and revisionism" it seemed ideal. It provided an ideological umbrella that, whatever its subsequent leaks, enabled at least three organizations to get started and attract several hundred members each in the early '70s.

The chief student-derived Maoist organizations in the early '70s were the Revolutionary Union and the October League. The RU originated as a study circle of ex-student community and workplace organizers in 1968 and emerged





publicly as the Bay Area Revolutionary Union in the spring of 1969 (in time to play a prominent role in the fight against Progressive Labor at the SDS convention that year). Publishing a series of documents called the Red Papers, BARU members made contact with others around the country attracted to its seriousness, its perspective of doing working class organizing, and its program of laying the groundwork for an eventual Leninist party while building a "united front" against American imperialism. (Formally there was little difference between the united front and the CP's anti-monopoly coalition, since BARU equated imperialism with monopoly capitalism. But there was a vast difference in the tone, since BARU came out of the New Left; in practical terms the "forces" that BARU was talking about uniting were much smaller than the well-established reform movements the CP hoped to influence.)

Groups of ex-students in other cities started to form local collectives and BARU became a national organization, the Revolutionary Union, in late 1970. (By early 1973 it had organized groups in fifteen different areas, and by late 1974 it was in about twenty-five.) Throughout the group's early life there was a running tension between militant anti-imperialism and often low-keyed workplace organizing. The tension came to a head in mid-1972 when a large part of the Bay Area RU group, led by Bruce Franklin, broke away to form Venceremos, a short-lived organization that espoused urban guerilla warfare. For the RU majority, whose most influential leader was Bob Avakian, the most urgent task was to build a working class base through the efforts of RU members who took blue-collar jobs.

The second major organizational pole of attraction for ex-student leftists wanting to proletarianize themselves in the early 1970s was

the October League, formed in May 1972 as a merger of the Los Angeles October League and the Atlanta-based Georgia Communist League. Both of the component groups were derived from remnants of the "Revolutionary Youth Movement II" faction that existed briefly in SDS (with a more traditionally Leninist version of the Weatherman's anti-imperialism) at the time of the 1969 split. The key figures were Mike Klonsky of the Los Angeles group, a former SDS national secretary, and Lyn Wells of Atlanta, a former leader of the Southern Student Organizing Committee and a RYM-II candidate for national office (along with Bob Avakian of BARU) at the '69 SDS convention. Aside from veterans of the white New Left, the Atlanta group also had several young blacks who had been part of the civil rights movement. Both the Los Angeles and Atlanta groups had been formed in 1970 with a perspective of taking blue-collar jobs and developing a working class base. Before their 1972 merger and for about a half-year afterwards they put their main emphasis on trying to recruit workers into study groups on the basis of putting forward communist ideas. As the OL's founding Statement of Unity put it, the group stressed "broad propaganda directed primarily at the advanced workers."\*

Aside from the RU and the OL (which was attracting attention nationally and laying the basis for the adhesion of ex-student collectives in several other cities), there were a wide variety of other Maoist groups emerging in the early 1970's, some strictly local and others with claims to a national scope. The most important

\* This reference, along with others in a similar vein, was excised a year later when the OL reprinted its founding document — with no indication that the document had been altered to reflect a change in line. Of all the American Leninist groups the OL, now the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), has probably been the least scrupulous in its regard for historical accuracy.

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# Build the New Party To Lead the Masses!

were (a) the Communist League, which merits special discussion; (b) a collection of tiny groups linked with the main Canadian Maoist organization (the Communist Party of Canada M-L), notable chiefly for their doctrinaire purism and subsequently joined together in late 1973 as the Central Organization of U.S. Marxist Leninists; (c) the Black Workers Congress, founded in 1971 by the non-factory leadership within the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit and moving toward Maoism after its formation; (d) the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization, an offshoot of the former Young Lords Organization and active chiefly in New York; and (e) some shifting Chinese-American formations, with I Wor Koen as the most significant. In addition there were local collectives, some of which were in the process of affiliating with nationally organized groups. On the fringes, important because of their local roots but not really Maoist in their orientation, were a number of groups such as the Sojourner Truth Organization in Chicago (another offshoot of the RYM-II grouping in SDS), Modern Times in Cleveland, Workers Unity in St. Louis, and a dozen or so others. (These latter groups held a conference in Cincinnati in the fall of 1972 which drew about 200 people. They were bound loosely by an extra-unionist outlook on workplace organizing, a sharp emphasis on racism as a divisive force in the working class,

and a de-emphasis on party-building as an immediate priority; they never came together as a national formation, however.)

The only group that could be ranked along with RU and the October League in importance was the Communist League. Derived from a largely black and Puerto Rican group of orthodox Stalinists who were expelled from the Communist Party in the late 1950s, CL had started as the California Communist League with about a dozen members in 1968. It attracted a few New Left survivors after the SDS split and became the Communist League; its most important step was when a large number of the factory participants in the old League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit joined in the early '70s. CL had the heaviest working class composition of any Maoist group in this period, but its leaders argued that no practical activity was possible until a party was formed.

American Communist groups in the years after 1919 would undoubtedly have proliferated and split endlessly if the Communist International had not stepped in and forced the creation of a unified party in 1921. In the 1970s, however, the Chinese leadership showed no interest in playing a comparable role in regard to the array of Maoist organizations in the U.S. and other advanced capitalist countries. The major attempt at bringing unity to the party-building process was made by *The Guardian*, which sponsored a series of forums



featuring representatives of different groups in the spring of 1973 in New York. They all drew respectable crowds, with the forum "What Road to Building a New Communist Party?" drawing over a thousand people to hear speakers from RU, October League, Black Workers Congress, and *The Guardian* itself. It was in this period that Irwin Silber could write that "Today, Marxist-Leninist forces in the U.S. are moving inexorably towards the creation of a new communist party."<sup>10</sup>

But unity in the new Maoist left was tantalizingly brief. The Communist League stayed aloof from the *Guardian*-sponsored discussions and by the time of the last two forums in the summer of 1973 the RU and October League were trading barbs (with the RU accused of sectarianism and OL of opportunism). By the end of 1973 the Communist League was moving on its own to form a party, the RU and OL were at each other's throats, and RU members had been ousted from the lower-level jobs several of them had held on *The Guardian*. The RU was the largest Maoist group, with perhaps 600-800 members, but it appeared that it would be the beneficiary of neither a united front from above (through alliances with the other major groups) nor a united front from below (by recruiting their members). In the spring of 1974 the process of disintegration went further when RU lost the alliance it *had* been able to build with the Black Workers Congress and the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organizaton and also lost most of its few black members in a dispute over the "national question." At that time, with its isolation the most pronounced, RU announced that the time had come to "unite all who can be united" to form a new party, and intensified its polemics.

Differences on substantive issues were partly a cause and partly an effect of the tendency toward organizational proliferation. Of these

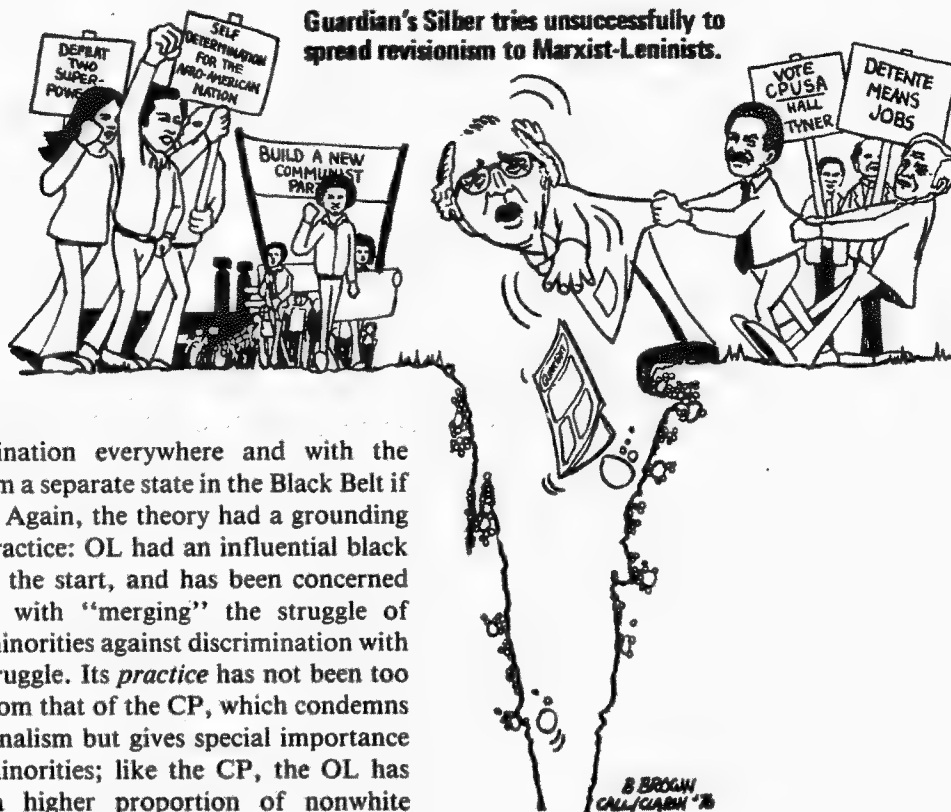
differences, the most significant was over the "national question" as applied to American blacks. All of the groups paid at least lip service to the 1928 Comintern resolution asserting that blacks in the southern Black Belt constituted a nation with the right to self-determination. But in seeking to apply this analysis the new Maoist groups diverged wildly.

The disputes, despite the bizarre trappings that they sometimes took, were not ideological hairsplitting but represented sincere efforts to see how a unified movement might somehow be built out of the racially separate revolutionary movements of the late 1960s. The most startling application of the Comintern theory was that of the Communist League, whose leader Nelson Peery formulated the notion that there was still a Negro Nation in the old Black Belt South, despite the huge out-migration of blacks since the 1920s; all the residents of that area, including its white majority, were designated as "Negroes." This was a convoluted attempt to give an ideological underpinning to CL's thoroughly integrationist attitude toward its own projected party and the path it saw toward working class unity. The Revolutionary Union, for its part, floated the theory that blacks were still a nation but a "nation of a new type," overwhelmingly proletarian in make-up. For RU this theory (which was finally dropped in favor of agnosticism after never-ending internal debates) served chiefly as a theoretical counterpart to its practical opposition to special demands on behalf of blacks or other nonwhite groups; RU's perspective has been similar to that of the CP's unite-and-fight practice from the 1930s, minus the progressive content that the CP's line had in a time of rampant and unsubtle Jim Crowism. Finally the October League had a confusing view that blacks were still a nation in the Black Belt South and a national minority elsewhere, with the right of

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**Guardian's Silber tries unsuccessfully to spread revisionism to Marxist-Leninists.**



self-determination everywhere and with the right to form a separate state in the Black Belt if they chose. Again, the theory had a grounding in actual practice: OL had an influential black cadre from the start, and has been concerned throughout with "merging" the struggle of nonwhite minorities against discrimination with the class struggle. Its *practice* has not been too different from that of the CP, which condemns black nationalism but gives special importance to racial minorities; like the CP, the OL has attracted a higher proportion of nonwhite members than in the population as a whole.

While there was wide variance among the emerging Maoist groups on the "national question," there was much greater unity on the sexual issues that had been raised within the student movement at the end of the '60s. All the major Maoist groups excluded homosexuals from membership, opposed feminism as bourgeois or petit-bourgeois ideology, and barred women's caucuses from forming within their organizations. Within this general framework there were differences, with the RU standing out for its opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and for its open sneering at homosexuality, but the broad outlines were the same. In general they followed the example of the CP

(earlier copied by the Progressive Labor Party) and rejected the alternative taken by the Trotskyist and neo-Trotskyist groups. The SWP, Workers World and IS all welcomed homosexuals, though the SWP had barred them prior to the emergence of gay liberation as an issue in the late '60s, and tried to accommodate feminist ideology to Leninism rather than rejecting it outright.

The adoption of conservative sexual politics by the new Leninist groups made sense. First of all, there was precedent. The Stalin era in the USSR, which to these groups represented the building of socialism, had been marked by the



restoration of Czarist policies on homosexuality, abortion, divorce, and similar topics which the Bolsheviks had at first swept away after 1917. Present-day China has also been quite puritanical in its official views of sex, and it was natural that the new American groups would take up the example of China as well as Stalin's USSR. Second, the task that the new Leninists were setting for themselves — the creation of a new vanguard party in a period of declining political motion — was one that called for an extraordinary effort of will and a bending of every effort toward political ends. Puritanism represented a natural corollary. It was not sexual abstinence that was called for, but the channeling of sexual energy into stable male-female relationships that would provide the fewest distractions possible (for the individual and for the group) and would leave the maximum amount of time for political work. Third, student-derived groups like the RU and OL were going into the American working class as uninvited guests, as politicians seeking to win a following rather than as working class people acting directly out of rage against society. As such they felt a need to define as narrowly as possible the range of issues on which they would present controversial ideas. It is this latter trait which, in general, makes political parties (not just Leninist ones) very slow to pioneer new ideas in the sphere of social relations; the tendency is always to take the approach that "We're just like you except that we believe X instead of Y on this particular issue."

The Maoist groups' hard-line position cannot be fully understood, however, without taking into account the political rivalry that they were inevitably engaged in with the women's movement. Maoism and feminism were the main claimants to the political heritage of the New Left in the altered climate of the early

'70s. Maoism laid claim to the New Left's strong identification with Third World nationalist revolution, of which the foremost example was China. Feminism, although it arose in the late '60s largely as a reaction to blatant sexism within the New Left, still owed a great deal to the New Left's vision of individuals having power over their own lives. Feminism (in all its variants) and Maoism confronted each other as warring cousins, and the Maoist groups were much less able to take feminist insights in their stride than were the older groups like the Socialist Workers Party. In the struggle of the new Maoist groups for a "critical mass" of members to launch Leninist parties, the autonomous women's movement was the main organized source of resistance to recruitment among veterans of the New Left.

#### LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: THE EARLY SEVENTIES

As most of the left-Leninist groups saw it, their central task in the early 1970s was to develop a presence in the American working class. The CP already had such a presence (however covert the party often had to be) but the other groups did not. Before looking at their efforts, it may be well first to look at the situation of the CP, which served in some important ways as the negative example that the left-Leninist groups hoped to avoid. The CP's two major problems, as admitted by party leaders themselves, were its lack of a strong rank-and-file presence and its limited ability to mobilize even its own members for coordinated efforts.

The CP's strong suit in its working class activity was the influence its members had won over a period of decades among a wide layer of mainly lower-level trade union officials. When

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it initiated the Rank and File Conference in June 1970 it was able to secure a large number of endorsements, even from national officers of some unions. At the same time, the party had much greater frustration when it came to developing strength at the base. While party leaders talked of the need to form rank-and-file caucuses in unions (with Trade Unionists for Action and Democracy as a kind of coordinating center) very few caucuses were actually formed. Here a major problem was CP members' reluctance to distance themselves from union officials whose policies they could generally support. CP members had much more to offer these officials in the role of energetic activists who could provide legwork in union affairs than they could offer as leaders of independent caucuses. There was a trade-off between the dangers of cooptation on the one hand and isolation on the other.

A second aspect of the CP's work that the rival Leninist groups hoped to avoid was the party's tendency toward centrifugal motion, with members going off almost on their own. The 1969 CP convention, for example, had taken as its main theme the policy of "industrial concentration," with basic industry in the Midwest as the main focus. But two years later the party was still bogged down in discussions about how best to implement the policy.<sup>11</sup> In general the CP tended to recruit somewhat stabler, better-rooted people than the left-Leninist groups, and that made it all the harder for the party itself to decide its members' priorities for their own lives. By the same token, the CP's recruitment of new members from community organizations was often a two-way street. One party leader complained that "some of our comrades consider themselves as mass workers first and Communists second. They in fact become representatives of the mass movements in the

Communist party, not class conscious Communists in the mass movement."<sup>11</sup> The classic instance of the party's *de facto* decentralization was the 1972 presidential election, in which CP leader (and candidate) Gus Hall charged angrily that not all the members of the party's own central committee had voted for him.<sup>12</sup>

Needless to say, trade unionists in or close to the CP looked askance at young people from left-Leninist groups coming into the workplaces. The CP regards them as "basically the 'Left' flank of monopoly attack on honest trade unionism," while the director of Trade Unionists for Action and Democracy has called them "conscious, organized disrupters, as often as not, in the pay of the FBI, the CIA or the local red squad of the local police department."<sup>13</sup> The underlying issue, aside from organizational chauvinism, is that the CP has regarded itself as the best judge of how far the unions (and workers) can be nudged to the left in a particular situation; the left-Leninist groups are seen as naive at best and as jeopardizing the possibilities of whatever gains can realistically be made by the unions in their struggles with management.

Actually, the work of the CP's rival organizations in the early '70s showed that it was possible for ex-student leftists to play an influential role, within certain definite limits. In individual workplaces, the role tended to depend on the individuals involved; that is, members of the Leninist groups would function well or badly depending on the same qualities that produce natural leaders in factories regardless of their organizational memberships. In strike-support work or other labor-solidarity actions, on the other hand, the size and energy of the organization in a particular city would be an important factor. In only one case during this period — the RU's work in organizing support committees for the Farah garment strike, which

dragged on from May 1972 to early 1974 — was any group able to make an impact as a nationally coordinated organization.

All of the groups eschewed from the start, or soon abandoned, the approach of trying to recruit working class people directly into the organization by propagandizing. PL tried that, especially in 1970-1971 with its *Challenge*-selling campaigns and all-out denunciations of trade-union leaders, but began turning away from that emphasis after about a year when it appeared to be isolating present members faster than it recruited new ones. The October League, although its style was very different from PL's, had a comparable approach at first, trying to recruit "advanced workers" into study groups in the shops where its ex-student members worked. And a few people were recruited in that way, but OL's main period of growth came after it decided in late 1972 to put much more stress on involvement in trade unions and in concrete workplace issues.

The turning point for OL came with a wave of black-led wildcat strikes, chiefly over racial discrimination, in Atlanta in the summer of 1972. After workers had wildcatted successfully against two major employers in the city, black OL members working at the Mead Packaging Corp. took the initiative in setting up a rank-and-file group which issued demands and then called a walkout to back them up. The wildcat lasted for seven weeks, with most of the black workers (two-thirds of the workforce) staying out. There was widespread support in the black community, mobilized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Sherman Miller of OL, chairman of the strike committee, won an overwhelming vote of confidence in the face of red-baiting by the *Atlanta Constitution*. On the other hand, most of the white workers stayed at work and the strikers won only limited gains. The Mead

strike gave OL a confidence that its members *could* take leadership in workplace struggles rather than staying isolated, but also a feeling that these struggles would have to go through unions if they were to be effective.

After OL's turn in late 1972, none of the groups had an approach that relied mainly on ideological appeals. Instead, they sought to involve themselves in trade-union and shop-floor politics (through union caucuses, strike support, union organizing drives, and sometimes direct action on workplace grievances). The idea was that by helping to provide leadership around day-to-day issues, members of the Leninist groups would both help to win immediate demands in a way that would increase working class solidarity, and at the same time create an opening in which they could broach wide political issues.

The main proponent of working in trade-union caucuses was IS. Its orientation was toward oppositional caucuses organized nationally within unions. It was not then strong enough in any industry to start such a caucus, but its members became involved where they could, notably the United National Caucus in auto, Teamsters United Rank and File, and the United Action Caucus of the teachers union. Of these, the United National Caucus was the one that offered IS the most room to work. (Teamsters United Rank and File was a fragile coalition of dissident bureaucrats whose warring ambitions tore the group apart within a year of its founding in 1971; the teachers caucus was too large for IS to have much impact.) The UNC had originated among skilled trades workers in the late '60s and had attracted a few long-standing UAW oppositionists but had no concerted participation by an organized left group until IS arrived to provide a lot of its legwork. As a national opposition inside the UAW, which despite the presence of shifting

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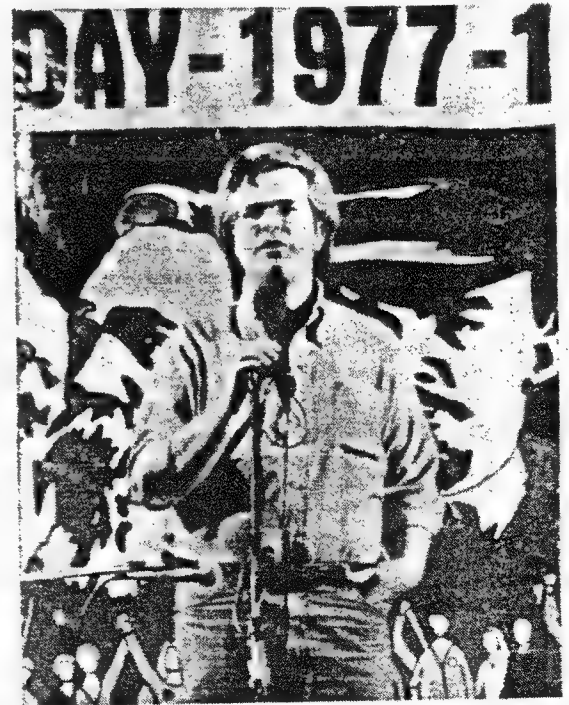
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cliques among its leadership is subject to the same one-party rule that Walter Reuther forged in the 1940s, the UNC was utterly insignificant. But it did maintain itself as a potential rival leadership, with a basic loyalty to the union as an institution. For IS the caucus provided a legitimacy in its union work that it could never have won so quickly by itself. The trade-off was that when IS members acted in the caucus's name they had to soft-pedal their own politics in behalf of a lowest common denominator acceptable to the caucus's best-known leaders.

The October League's experience with caucuses (which earned it a steady barrage of criticism from the RU for "right opportunism") was similar to IS's. Participation in caucuses led by other people could help give OL members legitimacy but could also hinder their freedom of action. The most-discussed example was the Brotherhood Caucus which OL worked in and helped to build at the Fremont, Calif., General Motors plant in 1973. The caucus swelled to 2,000 members by the time of the local elections which put the caucus's leader into the shop presidency. Once in office, he soon distanced himself from his left supporters, and in time OL was denouncing him vigorously. This sort of problem was especially likely to arise with black candidates for union office; given historic discrimination against black workers in the plants and the less-than-proportional representation in the union leadership, it was sometimes easy for black candidates to win office with black and white radicals doing much of the legwork. But the same pressures toward organizational conservatism that exist for white union officers exist for nonwhites as well, and the historical transformation of yesterday's militant into today's bureaucrat is just as easy. The CP puts major emphasis on the election of nonwhites to union office as a good thing in itself, but for groups

like the OL with shallower roots and necessarily a more rank-and-file orientation the problem is acute. A group like the OL has nothing to offer a union leader once he or she is in office.

A comparable problem could arise in union organizing drives, which OL and RU members were often involved in. Here the dilemma was the classic one of whether to subordinate everything else to the need to get a majority of workers to vote for a union. OL's newspaper *The Call* said at one point that radicals should use the organizing struggle "when workers are most open to political ideas, to bring political issues directly into the labor movement."<sup>14</sup> But the pressures in the other direction are enormous; even aside from the anti-communism of the unions, there is always the fear of identifying the organizing committee with the views



OL speaker calls for a new communist party. *The Call*, May, 1977.

of its left-wing members and making the union drive easier to red-bait. There was no real resolution to this dilemma. The worst situation of all, especially as sectarianism grew among the Maoist groups, was for more than one group to be in the same non-union shop; one electronics shop near Boston, for example, is now considered unorganizable because too many different groups have members working there.

Whatever else they did, all the groups put a major stress on trying to stimulate labor solidarity, most commonly through strike support. This was most central to RU's work. RU members in about twenty cities started local workers' monthly newspapers (with names like "The Worker," "People's Voice," "Northwest Worker," etc.) for the purpose of carrying local labor news as well as doing low-keyed propaganda work. Distributed at workplaces all over the metropolitan area, the paper would try to convey a sense of class-wide solidarity. When strikes took place, RU branches would publicize them through the paper and, if they had the opportunity, would try to get workers from other workplaces to join the picket lines in solidarity. During the Farah strike of 1972-74 RU, building on the fact that it had cadre in El Paso close to the strike, built support committees which pressured clothing stores not to carry Farah products. In general, the strike support work of RU and other groups had the strength of being able to show strikers that they had allies. It also had a weakness in that the allies who could most easily be mustered were student and ex-student radicals. The main exception was in the case of ethnically based strikes like those of the Farah workers and the United Farmworkers (whose boycott nearly all the left groups took part in, especially during 1973-74); groups in the large Chicano communities in the West would often take an active part in support work for those strikes,

comparable to the role Atlanta blacks had played in offering a base of support for the Mead strike. In those cases, though, the message was as likely to be ethnic solidarity as it was working-class solidarity. Still, for all its limitations, strike support work probably represented the left groups' most tangible accomplishment in the early 1970s.

PL and RU were the two groups most oriented toward direct action over workplace grievances, although all the groups were ready to take part if something arose. PL was the most explicit in championing the tactic. As *Challenge* said in 1972, "When the best interests of the workers conflict with the bosses' laws, 'ground rules,' contracts or 'legal procedures' already laid down, a fight must be made to *break these rules*."<sup>15</sup> For about a year after it formed the Workers Action Movement in 1972, PL/WAM put its main emphasis on petitions for 30 hours work for 40 hours pay, but in the summer of 1973 it turned to direct action as its main thrust.

In the auto industry in particular, PL put forward a strategy of walkouts over health and safety hazards on the job. Besides being a way to deal with the hazards (which were rife, especially since the companies were working the lines overtime), such walkouts were seen as a way of preventing the companies from building up a stockpile in anticipation of the UAW contract expirations in the fall. In fact, PL members did play a role in several short walkouts over excessive heat in the Mahway, New Jersey Ford plant, and touched off a sit-in and strike at the Mack Avenue Chrysler plant in Detroit in August. The Mack strike, coming on the heels of two unrelated but successful shutdowns of other Chrysler plants in Detroit, evoked the full power of the UAW, which mobilized a thousand union officers and staff people to disperse the picket line and steer workers into the plant. Ignoring the fact that

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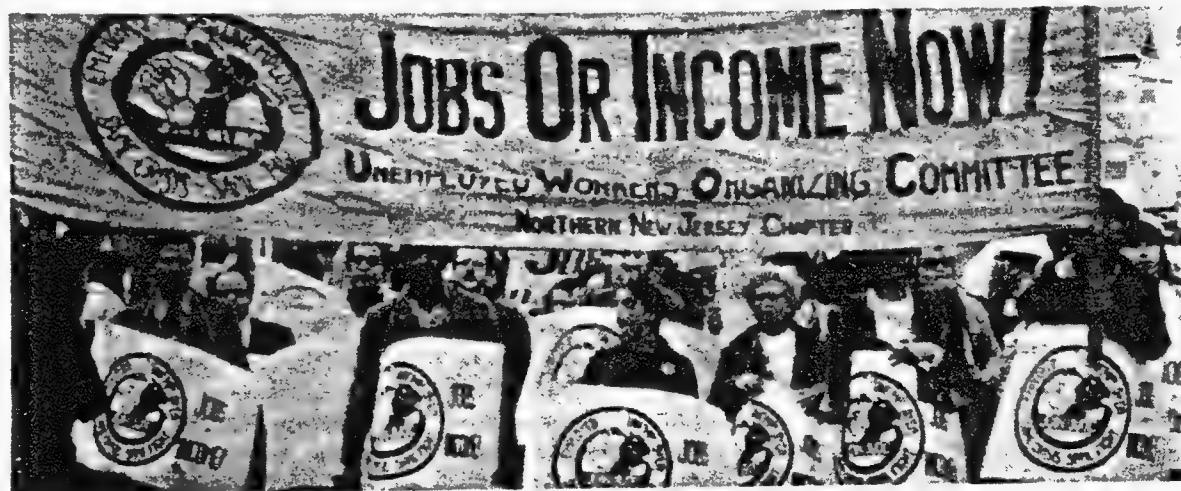
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the Mack strike had grown out of a particular context, PL took it as a vindication of its ability to lead workers in struggle and drew the lesson of "Greater Boldness" from the episode. A full-page *Challenge* headline in January '74, still reflecting this orientation, called on workers to **"Be Bold: Storm the Union Halls; Be Bold: Block the Plant Gates; Be Bold: Sit In; Be Bold: Besiege the Bosses; Be Bold: Wildcat."**<sup>16</sup>

Abstract directives could, of course, get no response, but even when members of a Leninist group tried to plan a walkout nobody was able to calculate when there would be a response and when there would not. In June 1974, for example, the firing of an RU member who was a chief steward at the Dodge truck plant instantly sparked a three-day wildcat that involved the energies and initiative of a great number of workers in the plant. Yet later in the summer radicals in the plant tried several times to lead walkouts over excessive heat, without getting any response.

In all the areas of their work, the ex-student Leninist groups were trying to recruit working class people as a major step toward trans-

forming the organizations themselves. It was slow going, though there were some gains. The chief barrier to recruitment seemed to be the intense demands that membership in the groups made on a person's time. It was not uncommon for members to spend nearly all their waking hours, whether on the job or in conversation or at meetings, doing something related to the work of the organization. Even though all the groups tended to have lower expectations of worker-recruits than of the ex-student core members, the time demands were still fierce for any member. Not many indigenous workers were found who were willing to make that kind of commitment, especially those with families. It was a special problem when a married person would join but not the spouse; any time taken for the organization would have to be fought for within the family. During the period the October League probably had the highest proportion of working class recruits — mainly black and latin — though exact figures are impossible to come by. The Revolutionary Union attracted a fair number of working class people into its "intermediate organizations" (strike support and other ad hoc committees,



Unemployed demonstration in Washington, D.C., April, 1977. From *Revolution*, organ of the RCP.



Unemployed Worker Organizing Committees, and newspaper staffs) but people tended to come in for a while and then drift away, with not many of them ending up as members of R.U.

Even aside from the question of time, there were other barriers to working class recruitment. In a great many instances the workers who were most radical, most ready to fight back against management, were basically rebels — not at all interested in harnessing their anger to a disciplined organization. They might readily take part in demonstrations, work with party people on specific projects, but feel no desire to submerge their own individuality in the party. For many of them, especially those put off by reliance on quotations from classic Marxist-Leninist texts, the party would simply present them with a new kind of authority not wholly different from the kind they resisted in the rest of their lives. The “petit bourgeois individualism” which many Leninists condemned was by no means a unique trait of the “petit bourgeoisie.”

#### HARD TIMES, 1975-77

It is sometimes said that lack of interest among working class people in left politics is due to the ability of the capitalist system to “deliver the goods,” and that in conditions of economic crisis the organized left has the potential for accelerated growth. Whatever the general validity of this notion, it has not been true in the mid-1970s. The onset of a near-depression in the U.S. at the end of 1974, reaching the highest unemployment level (9.2% officially) since the 1930s in May 1975, had no catalyzing effect on the organized left. Among the left-Leninist groups, with the exception of successful work in some areas, the general trend was toward a slowed rate of growth, greater sectarianism, and a variety of adaptations that

made the goal of a mass revolutionary Leninist party seem much more distant.

The frustration has been greatest in the Maoist milieu that grew up in the early '70s. Continued organizational rivalries and conflicting responses to events in China and to Chinese views of the international situation made the term “new communist movement” a virtual anachronism. But all the left-Leninist groups have had the dilemma that, while they can often do good work on some issues, they have been able neither to play a major role in working-class resistance to the economic crisis nor to gain hegemony on the left over their rivals. All of them keep going today chiefly on the raw energy of their ex-student cadre.

The one group which has probably been affected least by the economic turndown has been the Workers World Party. Its forte has been pulling together united-front actions around issues of imperialism and racism in alliance with whatever other groups it can work with in a particular city. Workers World, in fact, has been by far the most successful group on the left in building united-front coalitions in which even different Leninist organizations can coexist, however uneasily. That is true because it has been the most patient about its own organizational growth, and the least concerned with distinguishing itself from its rivals. Its major accomplishment in recent years was the initiation of an anti-racism march in Boston in December 1974, which drew well over 10,000 people and overshadowed the much smaller crowds which anti-busing forces had been able to bring out for demonstrations during the early months of school desegregation in Boston. Except for the CP, which stayed aloof (the head of the Young Workers Liberation League dismissed the march as “a routine exercise in left sectarianism”<sup>17</sup>) all the other

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major national and local left organizations joined in building it. Workers World's own growth has been modest. It has groups in about fifteen cities in the East, Midwest and South, and — this is a guess — about three or four hundred members. It has functioned chiefly as a cadre of demonstration-builders, and its presence is felt much more on the left than its size would suggest.

At the other extreme, the Progressive Labor Party has been affected the most by the economic crunch. Over the course of 1975 and '76 PL moved steadily toward the belief that its work, however militant, had been reformist rather than revolutionary. As the party's national committee said in the fall of 1976, "in a period when the ruling class is unable to make concessions and attacks workers harder on all fronts, the situation cries out for revolution."<sup>11</sup> It began to project joining PL as the only immediate step that workers could take to resist the effects of the crisis. *Challenge*, reporting on a struggle over the firing of a welfare worker in Detroit, said, "One worker asked whether we were using Lou Etta's case as a 'publicity stunt' to build the Party. The answer is basically yes."<sup>12</sup> PL's problems in trying to recruit directly on the basis of "Reform No, Revolution Yes" were compounded by the fact that *Challenge*, though now a weekly instead of a monthly, was far less appealing, graphically and stylistically, than in the early '70s. Much of it was directed at party members themselves and not even nominally at the outside world. As of mid-1977 PL was present in about as many cities as it had been earlier in the decade, but only in New York was it of any appreciable size. (The second and third largest chapters, in Boston and the Bay Area, had left more or less en masse in the spring of 1974 and the spring of '76 respectively.) Individually, members of the party could involve themselves in militant

workplace activity — as when several PL'ers in a Chicago AFSCME local helped lead a several-week wildcat strike in the summer of 1976 — but it had nothing to do with their being members of a Leninist party.

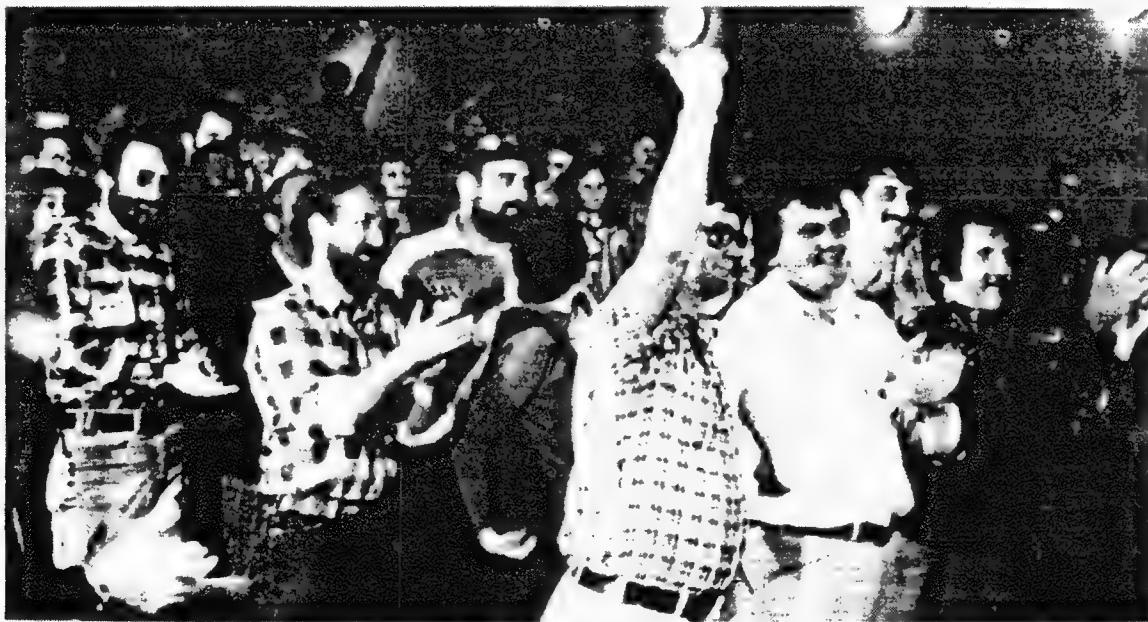
The Socialist Workers Party's perspective remained one of "adjusting ourselves to the demands and direction of the mass movement in order to help lead that movement forward,"<sup>20</sup> and on the whole this strategy has nudged it somewhat to the right as the turbulence of the '60s has receded further into the past. Within the Coalition of Labor Union Women, formed in 1974, the SWP along with the CP opposed the efforts of groups like IS and the October League to attack the top-down structure of CLUW and lessen its reliance on high-level women trade union officials. The party's 1976 presidential campaign, although in its details it was as full of transitional demands (ones which cannot be granted within the structure of capitalism) as ever, had an overall tone of much greater moderation. When he first scanned the SWP platform, the staff director of the Democratic Party's 1976 platform committee said "It all looks perfectly reasonable. You may have saved me ten months of work."<sup>21</sup> During the turmoil in Portugal in the summer of 1975 the SWP, in contrast to all the major European Trotskyist groups, vehemently attacked the Portuguese CP and far-left groupings for failing to respect parliamentary forms.

The SWP's major practical successes in recent years have been in exposing federal violations of civil liberties and in organizing around the defense of busing. Its suit against government surveillance, filed in 1973 and still in the courts, has released thousands of pages of evidence of the government's "Cointelpro" harassment of left and liberal activists. The SWP's suit has thus been to the benefit of the entire U.S. left. The SWP also initiated the

National Student Coalition Against Racism which helped to build the December 1974 anti-racism march and a follow-up in May 1975 called by the Boston NAACP. Its work around busing, which brought a substantial number of blacks into the YSA and SWP, also served as a bridge into working class recruitment. The party enunciated a turn toward the working class at its 1975 convention, and began to break up its city-wide branches into separate locals with some being in working class areas. An increasing trickle of new recruits began coming into the party directly rather than through the YSA, and the change has been most pronounced among blacks. The proportion of blacks is not quite as high as in the population as a whole, but it is growing. The party claims to have 59 percent more members than it did two years ago, which probably means that it has somewhere around 1,800 now. At the same

time, sales of *The Militant* are only about two-thirds of their peak in 1973.

The work of the International Socialists in the mid-70s has been marked by one major success — its work in the Teamsters union — and a general frustration. IS's almost exclusive workplace orientation has been a source of weakness in a period of high unemployment. Not only is it harder for IS members to get or keep the kind of industrial jobs that the organization stresses, but the level of fighting that can be carried on in those jobs is lessened. High unemployment puts the management in a stronger position, with workers tending to be more worried about losing their jobs. Layoffs also reduce the proportion of young, nonwhite, and female workers in a shop — people who are often most sympathetic to some of the aims of left groups and most estranged from the union leaderships. IS's main adaptation to this cir-



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cumstance has been to attempt worker recruitment on the basis of trying to win whatever small victories can be won in the economic pinch. Union contract negotiations have been the main focus.

✓ IS's biggest impact was in the Teamsters Union, where IS members stimulated the creation of two nationwide networks: Teamsters for a Decent Contract, organized around the master freight agreement, and an organization named UPSurge among United Parcel Service workers. Both groups, arising in an oppositional vacuum in the gangster- and Republican-ridden Teamsters Union, attracted a lot of indigenous rank and file leaders and a lot of attention within the union. TDC in particular, which drew hundreds of Teamsters to some of its local rallies, can probably be credited with pressuring the union leadership to win a marginally better contract than it would otherwise have gotten. And some Teamsters came into IS as a result of their contact with it.

✓ At the same time, TDC was organized around the narrowest of issues — not taking a stand, for example, on the Teamsters' scabbing on the United Farm Workers in California agriculture. The TDC national steering committee passed a motion to go on record as opposing "political change by any means other than lawful, constitutional procedures."<sup>22</sup> Still, for a few dozen IS members to catalyze any sort of national opposition within the Teamsters was a noteworthy feat. A successor-organization to TDC, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, has established itself in the past year as a persistent thorn in the side of the union.

IS in recent years has been acutely conscious of its nearly all-white origins and has tried intensively to recruit blacks. The first major attempt was a fiasco. In the fall of 1974 the black Socialist Collective in Los Angeles "merged" with IS and its leader was made a

national officer, but he and most of his followers were back out again after a few months of trying to resist assimilation into the much larger IS. More recently, however, IS has attracted a youth affiliate, the Red Tide which is mainly black, and some blacks have also been recruited in industrial work; the organization may be about 10 to 15 per cent black today.

At the same time, IS's industrial focus has helped to make it one of the most heavily male organizations on the left, despite the fact that it is receptive to many insights of the women's movement. More than any other Leninist groups, it has stayed away from community issues such as housing and welfare, and health care, in which working class women customarily play leading roles. Last spring, when IS expelled an opposition caucus (about one-fourth of the membership) that had grown up in opposition to the industrial-concentration policy, it lost a disproportionate number of its women members. It is probably at least two-thirds male today.

It is in the Maoist camp that high hopes of a few years ago have been most severely dashed. Organizations have survived, but the momentum that was apparent around 1972-73 has long since disappeared, along with all prospects for unification. One by one the major Maoist organizations have founded parties, more or less on their own. The Communist League formed the Communist Labor Party in September 1974, the RU formed the Revolutionary Communist Party in October 1975, and the October League formed the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) in June 1977. This summer *The Guardian* announced the start of its own effort to coalesce a party separate from all the others.

The inspiration furnished by China has, for most people and groups in the Maoist milieu, been badly dimmed. The two main turning



**EXPRESSING SOLIDARITY, Chairman Hua and Chairman Klonsky exchange toasts.**

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points were the civil war in Angola in late 1975, in which China denounced the efforts of the Soviet- and Cuban-backed MPLA to solidify control, and the apparent rightward turn in Chinese domestic policy after the death of Mao Tse-tung in the fall of 1976. Even before the Angolan civil war, the Communist Labor Party swung erratically away from its pro-China identification and essentially embraced the Soviet Union's foreign policy while continuing to call its government "revisionist." The *Guardian*, whose support for Third World national liberation movements was older and deeper than its Maoism, broke with China in late 1975 over its Angolan policy, which seemed to put China on the side of South Africa and the U.S. against what the *Guardian* felt were the legitimate forces of national liberation in Angola. For its part, the Revolutionary Communist Party, while defending Chinese foreign policy down the line, was benumbed by the campaign against the radical "Gang of Four" following Chairman Mao's death; the RCP has withheld all comment on China's course in domestic affairs since a general affirmation in October 1976 that it knew the Chinese proletariat would carry the revolution forward.\* Some smaller Maoist groups, such as the Central Organization of U.S. Marxist-Leninists, announced that China was now on the capitalist road and declared that Albania was now the center of world revolution.

\* In a refreshing lapse into humor, Clark Kissinger of the RCP (a one-time national secretary of Students for a Democratic Society) said in reply to an October League spokesman's insistence that he say where the RCP stood on the "Gang of Four," that "no matter what would have happened, if a chimpanzee had been elected Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, he would have gotten a telegram of congratulations from Michael Klonsky." (*Revolution*, Jan. 1977) OL, in a later polemic against the RCP, summarized this comment by accusing its rival of "heaping abuse on Stalin, Mao-Tse-tung and the present Chinese leadership (whom they referred to as 'chimpanzees.')" (*The Call*, April, 1977)

The October League was the principal group which declared itself ready to follow China wherever it led. OL has called for striking the "main blow" against the USSR in world affairs, and OL's chairman has spoken of opposing those forces in the U.S. which favor "appeasement." OL's newspaper gave instantaneous support to the Chinese leadership's campaign against the "Gang of Four" and has kept after the luckless "Gang" members ever since. In August 1977, after OL had formed the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), Chinese CP chairman Hua Kao-Feng singled out the new party's leaders for an elaborate banquet in Peking. The tone of the speeches seemed to indicate that the CP(ML) will be the closest thing to an "official" pro-China party in the U.S. With Mao Tse-tung dead, however, the prestige-value of this recognition is worth far less in the American left than it would have been a few years earlier.

Of the larger Maoist or once-Maoist groups, it is the Communist Labor Party that has suffered the most in the past several years in the sphere of organization-building. The CLP floundered ideologically after its founding congress in 1974, and now exists in the general orbit of Communist Party politics, a polite but unwanted left-opposition to the CP. The CLP's main newspaper, the *People's Tribune*, is like the Progressive Labor Party's current *Challenge* in being a propaganda organ that is much too dull for its intended purpose. Clearly at this point, CLP members who are doing effective political work in their workplaces and communities are doing so as individuals or small groups rather than as members of a national organization. A recent article in the *People's Tribune*, complaining that sales had dropped badly, said, "We must ask our comrades and our readers, if you do not use the national press to organize and lead the prole-



tariat in its activities, what *do* you use?"<sup>23</sup> At a guess, the party's membership may be about half of the five hundred people who attended its founding congress. The group's one successful activity is its book-publishing operation, which reprints and distributes old Stalinist classics under the imprints Proletarian Publishers and Vanguard Press.

The Revolutionary Communist Party, formerly the Revolutionary Union, started as the largest nationally organized Maoist group and it probably is still the largest today. But its momentum is questionable. Since the spring of 1974, when the RU announced its intention to "unite all who can be united" and found a new party, it has had slow going both in the ex-student Maoist milieu and among the working class people it has sought to draw in. Its attempt to wade into the Boston school crisis in the fall of 1974, with a strong stand against busing, had no impact on the course of the Boston desegregation fight but made RU a pariah on the left. Relations with the *Guardian* reached the point where RU members in New York held an angry demonstration at the newspaper's office protesting its treatment of RU activities. The RCP when it formed a year later was basically the RU plus a local group in Honolulu and scattered clusters of people that RU had already been working with in other cities. Since the party's founding its slow growth has been a disappointment to those who thought that having a party would make a major difference in the organization's work.

Although the RU/RCP has always stressed economic issues more insistently than any other Maoist group, the economic crisis of the mid-70s has led to only limited gains. RCP-initiated Unemployed Worker Organizing Committees have worked strenuously to mobilize the unemployed (under the old SDS slogan "Jobs or Income Now") and to

publicize cutbacks on unemployment relief, but there has been no massive response. It is sobering (and not merely for RCP members) that there have been no local demonstrations of the unemployed in any way comparable to the huge rallies of March 1930 which amounted to hundreds of thousands of people across the country. The RCP has also continued its labor-solidarity work with the initiation of city-wide or regional workers organizations in places such as the Bay Area, New York-New Jersey, and Milwaukee where it is strong enough. As of September 1977 there is also a National United Workers Organization with RCP members as its sinew. Much of the RCP's recruitment, however, seems to be through its student group the Revolutionary Student Brigade, which is the main nationally organized rival to the SWP's Young Socialist Alliance in the shrunken arena of left wing campus politics. More of the RCP's members than previously are working class in origin, but it is still a basically ex-student organization whose working class recruitment has never entered a period of self-sustaining growth. Its membership is probably around 600 nationally, and the largest demonstration it has led in recent years was its July 4, 1976 march in Philadelphia which drew around 3,000.

During 1974, while the RU antagonized more and more people in the Maoist milieu, the main beneficiary was the October League, which basked in its relative nonsectarianism. OL partisans held several *Guardian* staff positions, and OL members in Boston were able to pull together a "Fred Hampton Contingent" for the December 1974 anti-racism march with participation from a variety of independent (largely nonwhite) groups. But in short order OL moved toward a more sectarian stance. It split partially with the *Guardian* in the spring of 1975 over its insistence on "No United Action with Revisionists" in trying to lead Inter-

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national Women's Day marches with programs aimed at excluding the Communist Party. In the summer it announced plans to build a new party as soon as possible and in the fall it took sole control of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, a once-broad coalition of southern radicals and reformers. As it followed the intensification of Chinese anti-Soviet rhetoric in 1975 it progressively lost support in the ex-New Left milieu it had formerly thrived in.

During its protracted party-forming process, the OL's mass work took on an increasingly propagandistic and sectarian flavor. In the spring of 1975 its members formed local Fight Back committees to carry out resistance to attacks on working class living and working conditions. And a National Fight Back Organization was formed at a Chicago conference in December '75 with well over a thousand participants. But OL (now the Communist Party M-L) appears to have used the Fight Back groups for short-term recruitment, pushing its politics much harder than the RU does in its comparable organizations. Fight Back participants who cannot be recruited into OL appeared to drift away without being replaced by new people. At this point Fight Back demonstrations tend to be only a little larger than the CP(ML)'s own membership in the particular city where they take place. In 1976 OL criticized its previous trade union work for "rightist deviation" and denounced Ed Sadlowski's campaign for the United Steelworkers presidency as a trick by the bourgeoisie to "channel the revolutionary aspirations and strivings of the masses into reformism."<sup>24</sup> Its current trade-union slogans such as "Boycott the [union] elections! Drive out the bureaucrats! Build class struggle unions!" have no basis in logic and none in practice except as part of a fishing expedition for scattered workers who might be

potential recruits. Now that the party has been formed, the line will almost certainly change in the direction of less rhetorical militancy.



## CHILDREN'S CORNER

### Kids raise money for new Party!

Dear Call—

On Friday, me, my sister and our friends had a ice tea sale. We made lots and lots of ice tea. We sold most of the ice tea. Lots and lots of people got some ice tea.

After the sale was over, we made lots and lots of money. We made \$3.55. We are going to put all the money into the new Communist Party.

All of us are very happy. The price of the ice tea was a dime.

By Elizabeth, Catherine, Genevieve and Janine from Denver



From The Call, August, 1977.

The CP(ML) at this point is probably still somewhat smaller than the RCP, though it appears to have a larger working class (and especially nonwhite) composition. By being less hostile than the RCP to women's issues it has also built a membership that is much less male dominated. Over 60 per cent of the delegates to OL's 1975 congress, in fact, were women. The proportion of nonwhites in the organization may be as high as one-quarter or one-third, much higher than in the RCP.

For the organized left in general, the most discouraging aspect of its work in recent years has been its inability to touch off significant resistance to any of the major attacks that the economic crisis has brought onto working class people: unemployment, speed-up, cutbacks in social services, and the deportation of "illegal aliens." The theories of leadership of the Leninist groups have not been a significant aid in stimulating such resistance. The most significant work has probably been that of CP members, scattered throughout hundreds of unions and community organizations around the country, doing whatever seems possible in a given situation. The RCP's work around unemployment has been energetic and valuable, but, in relation to the size of the problem, hardly significant. The SWP has at times tried to apply its mass-demonstrations approach to the problem of social service cutbacks, but has had little success; for example, a New York demonstration called at the height of that city's fiscal crisis in 1975 drew only 300 people. All the groups have taken part in, or helped to organize, small local protests against the round-up of "illegal aliens," but the protests have been small and have chiefly a slight deterrent value in making the deportations fit less smoothly into the bureaucratic routine of local Immigration officials.

Where left groups have been able to make their presence felt nationally, it has mainly been around issues that are peripheral to the current economic crisis. Members of the RCP are said to have played a role in helping to spread the 1975 and 1977 wildcat strikes of coal miners; but the coal industry has been exceptional in experiencing boom times throughout the '70s. And another wildcat in 1976, with no sign of organized-left involvement, was as big as the other two. The work of IS members in the Teamsters union was also in the context of a

<sup>debatable according to Wall Street Journal</sup>  
well-organized industry in which workers had a degree of economic security as a basis for demanding greater concessions in the contract. Similarly, the Sadlowski campaign in the steel union, into which a number of left groups put a fair amount of energy, was conducted chiefly around issues of union democracy rather than being directly tied to the economic crisis. Sadlowski's 44 per cent showing, while significant in view of the red-baiting he encountered, was about the same as the percentage won by previous candidates who had lacked an organized network of supporters.

### PROSPECTS

<sup>In view of the rather radical line he was making.</sup>  
 A balance sheet on the efforts of American Leninist groups in the 1970s has to take account of both their practical work and the persistent hope that the vanguard of the working class will emerge through the strivings of the various Leninist parties and pre-party formations. It is hard to separate these two areas, since they are firmly linked together in the ideology of the Leninist groups themselves; in strategic discussions virtually every description of concrete work is seen as being related to the need for a vanguard party. But for our purposes it is necessary to separate the concrete work from the party-building aspirations.

In their concrete work, the Leninist groups have often come out looking quite well. In particular, the "colonization" of ex-students in blue-collar jobs has been anything but a fiasco. Like CP militants in previous decades, these people have generally been able to develop roots in their new surroundings and have been able to take an active role in workplace and union politics. Growing numbers of ex-student leftists (party members as well as independents) are being elected to lower-level trade unions offices, especially as shop stewards, after a few years on the job. Whatever the dilemmas they

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will encounter once in office, their election is a sign that they are accepted as workers and not as exotic intruders in the workplace. To be sure, it is by focusing on immediate issues that they are generally entrusted with formal or informal leadership; the one Leninist group which maintains the purest and most uncompromising stance in its trade-union work, the Spartacist League, has achieved near-total isolation for the union caucuses it has established. When groups like the October League and Progressive Labor periodically take on aggressive all-or-nothing postures in their leaflets and demands, the same isolation awaits those of their members who faithfully carry out the organizational line. But the general picture remains a positive one: a high proportion of the members of the left-Leninist groups are in working class jobs and are able to participate, often influentially, in the life and struggles of their workplaces.

Leninist organization has affected the concrete work of individual members in different, sometimes contradictory ways. It seems clear that the democratic-centralist structure, with constant criticism and self-criticism, draws from many individual members a far greater commitment of time and energy than they would otherwise make to their political work. At the same time, membership in a group (especially the smaller and more impatient left-Leninist groups) can diminish the chance of friendships with other workers. The party member has little free time and has to justify virtually any socializing to himself or herself in terms of the political uses that may come of it. Where the other worker happens to be a member of a different Leninist organization, the problem is compounded. This worker, rather than being a potential recruit, is an obstacle to recruitment. Depending on the flexibility of the individuals involved, squabbling between rival vanguards can often cause wonderment and



contempt toward the left in general among the uninvolved people who witness it. It can also severely hamper the concrete work that the members of any one group want to do. Even at best, a tremendous amount of time, for members of nearly all the Leninist groups, is spent in activities whose chief purpose is to build the organization itself rather than to spur working class activity more directly.

As for the "science of Marxism-Leninism" that some groups claim to be bringing to the class struggle, it is clear that the science is very often a matter of guesswork. The best discussions I have seen in a recent Leninist publication of this topic were in the RCP's *Revolution* in 1976, in a series of discussions of the "mass line." The articles were good in that they recognized the immense problems that face a would-be vanguard group in trying to gauge the mood of a group of workers and decide how to try to intervene in a fluid situation. As one of the articles said, in a convoluted analysis of one particular action, "While, on the one hand, communists couldn't have led the masses unless they were sticking close by them and coming from *within* their ranks, on the other hand,



once communists and advanced forces were within the ranks of the broad masses of workers and, to whatever extent they were within, there still remained the question of what they were going to do." The Communist Party has long accorded its members a very broad leeway in how they will act in concrete circumstances, having learned from experience the difficulties in setting national policies and programs that are too specific. Even the Socialist Workers Party, which in the '60s and '70s has concentrated its members' energies on campaigns set by the national SWP leadership, has generally stayed away from prescribing what its members should do in workplace settings or in unions. Newer and smaller groups like Progressive Labor, IS, and the Maoist groups, on the other hand, have tried to establish an organizational presence in the working class by committing as much energy as possible to specific, carefully chosen programs. But there is no "science" that guides them in these programs. A real science would enable a group to predict the results of its intervention in a particular field of activity, and all of these groups have been markedly unable to make predictions of that sort.

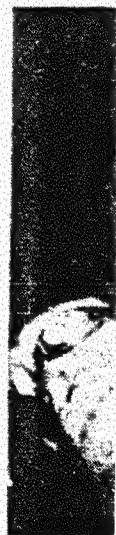
When we move on to the question of party-building, and the goal of creating a hegemonic party to the left of the CP, the prospects of the left-Leninist groups seem much more cloudy than in the realm of concrete activity. This is seen most obviously in the matter of size. The CP is by far the largest Leninist organization, and it also appears to be taking on new members faster than any other group. The left-Leninist groups, unlike the CP, are heirs of the student movement of the 1960s. But none of them was able to recruit enough survivors of that movement to create a critical mass of members for the forging of a strong party. And none of them has achieved a self-sustaining recruitment of working class members in recent

years. The Socialist Workers Party, much the largest of the groups other than the CP, had ideal conditions in the sectoral movements of the late '60s and early '70s to draw even with the CP, but it failed to do it.

Aggravating the problem of size is the problem of organizational proliferation. If everyone who wanted a Leninist party to the left of the CP were to unite, they might have a large one, but that is not within the realm of possibility. The growth of competing organizations is not simply the result of certain people being obsessively sectarian. Even where two groups might be fairly close politically, there is a built-in logic in the Leninist form of centralized organization that leads to the formation of new groups by those who cannot win the old groups to their positions. The fact that the CP has enjoyed a relatively large membership without any recent splits is due to the fact that the CP is a special case. First, it attained its position on the left during the Stalin era, when the Soviet Union's position as the single pole of attraction for Communists abroad offered a "franchise" to one Leninist group in every other country. Second, as we have seen, the CP does not operate as a Leninist cadre organization in nearly so disciplined a fashion as its smaller rivals; within the CP there is room for a far greater variety of viewpoints and activities than in the smaller groups.

Even if we leave aside the question of numbers, the experience of recent years casts doubt on the left-Leninist vision of a vanguard party to the left of the CP. For its rivals, the CP is a hopelessly compromised reformist organization, part of the problem and not a solution. The left-Leninist groups, especially the newer ones forged in the 1970s, have tasted neither the carrot of mass influence nor the stick of repression that are part of the CP's heritage. But even in the '70s the experience of these

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*Anita Bryant is  
no more of an  
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*...than the homosexuals she attacks.  
They are both signs that this  
society is falling apart.*

*From "Anita and the Drag Queens," article in the  
July 1977 issue of the New York-New Jersey  
Worker, affiliated with the Revolutionary Commun-  
ist Party*

groups offers signs that the necessities of organizational survival bring with them a certain cautionary influence. The Socialist Workers Party, for example, has seemed to deepen its commitment to parliamentary forms in the '70s, taking on some of the aspects of a social democratic party despite its Leninist forms of internal organization. The Revolutionary Communist Party's consistent stand against busing is hard to understand as anything other than an attempt to ease the party's acceptance in white working class areas. The Communist Party (M-L), formerly the October League, has followed its pro-China views to the point of taking what can only be called right-wing positions on issues of American foreign policy and military spending. All of the groups, to the extent that they have been able to take part in coalitions involving any significant number of workers, have had to play down many aspects of their politics; the International Socialists' work in the Teamsters Union is a good example of this.



It would be a grave mistake to view the frustrations of left-Leninism in the '70s as simply the product of "bad decisions" made by the leaders and members of the particular groups that have entered the field. The experience in the U.S. is basically the same as in other advanced capitalist countries, only on a smaller scale since our left is much less significant than elsewhere. Nowhere has a left-Leninist party, whether Trotskyist or Maoist or neither, threatened seriously to displace a Communist party or even to gather most of the left-Leninist forces in the country under its wing. What is in question is not the continued survival of most of the left-Leninist organizations in the U.S., nor their ability to make contributions to a working class resistance to capitalism. But when it comes to the specific organizational goals of these groups, the building of a large party that will eclipse the Communist Party from the left and become a revolutionary vanguard for the entire American working class, it is a different story. The experience of recent years suggests that the goal is a will-of-the-wisp.

#### FOOTNOTES

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JIM O'BRIEN is a printer and general staff member at the New England Free Press. He is an editor of Radical America.

#### Postscript

*This article benefitted from a lot of help, not all of which is easy to acknowledge. A number of present and recent members of the Leninist organizations described in the article were quite helpful in talking to me about their experiences, but I haven't felt at liberty to use their names.*

*Among the people who made useful criticisms and suggestions on an earlier draft of the article were Jeremy Brecher, Frank Brodhead, John Crawford, Phyllis Ewen, Stu Gedal, Jill Goldstein, Allen Hunter, Jim Kaplan, Staughton Lynd, Pete Rachleff, and Jim Russell. Their comments came from different points of view, and none of them has any responsibility for the judgments expressed in the article.*

*The very supportive attitudes of my co-workers at the New England Free Press (currently Annie Butler, Meg Costello, and Richard Stuart) made it possible for the article to be written.*

*The layout, which is the same in this pamphlet as in the original Radical America article, was worked out by Nick Thorkelson, who also did the cartoon on page 33.*